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What's In a Name, Non-Fiction Essay by Lynne Golodner

Photo by Kashawn Hernandez

"You'll feel different when you start using your Hebrew name," Bayla said.

We sat on the carpet as her children played, leaning against a sagging couch shoved against a bare wall. A corner shelf displayed wedding portraits of the oldest of her nine children. As couples arrived for Shabbat lunch, warm air floated in from the screen door that kept opening and closing, fluttering the tight curls at the back of my neck. The rest of my hair was tucked into a hat as a mark of marital modesty. I was two years into life as an Orthodox Jew, 29 and newly married to a lifelong religious guy, but I had just confided in Bayla that I felt as though I was posing.

She could have said any combination of reassuring words*: It's really hard to change your whole life, it's sad to let go of what you've always known, in choosing this life you are leaving behind friends and family and that must hurt*. She could have said, *you're totally part of us, and I hope you feel that soon.*

Instead, her response told me, *keep rejecting the people who love you, who raised you; shed everything about yourself until you no longer see the person you used to be.*

For as long as I could remember, I'd dreamt of falling in love with a man with whom I could be silly, sexy and adventurous. He'd match me in intellect, possess a quick wit and consider my hypersensitivity one of my most precious qualities. And though we'd fight, we'd make up fiercely. Beyond intense love, I wanted to be a mother (at least three kids, maybe five), and the fiery relationship that produced my beautiful children would be the iron-strong foundation for a loving, close family.

But by the time I reached my mid-20s, a string of imperfect relationships behind me, I wondered what was wrong with me if I could not attract my one true love and life partner. Everyone I knew was into hookups and casual dating, and most guys ran scared the minute they heard the word "marriage." My father always said, "People who want to get married, get married," but I didn't quite believe that included me because he also said I was too sensitive, and others in my family called me "bossy" and said I had a "big mouth." Guys were attracted to me, but none stuck around for long or showed interested in a shared future.

There was John, the Catholic from New Jersey whose antisemitic father accused a waiter of "Jewing" him. When he told his dad not to speak like that in front of me, I said, "He shouldn't speak like that at all." There was David, who was 16 when his parents split and considered any argument grounds for a breakup. That relationship lasted until our first fight. There was Bryan, who dumped me after attending my MFA graduation and meeting my whole family. Others flitted in and out just as quickly. So when at 26, while I was living in Washington, D.C., I experienced my first Orthodox Shabbat at a colleague's home, I was intrigued. There, I discovered a community that prioritized marriage and family, which I conflated with love and belonging.

In my colleague's "Modern Orthodox" community, women carried the Torah around their half of the sanctuary, wore pants and short sleeves and only covered their hair during services. They were doctors

sanctuary, wore pants and short sleeves and only covered their hair during services. They were doctors and lawyers and entrepreneurs. Their husbands seemed proud of, and attracted to, their strength. The rabbi's wife was taller than he and on Simchat Torah, her blond hair bounced as she danced in circles. She didn't hide herself, and no one expected her to.

When I moved back to Michigan the next year, I searched for a Modern Orthodox community of my own. Unable to find one, I settled on an Orthodox synagogue led by a dynamic rabbi who wore $500 suits and had earned an MBA. He and his wife, who covered her hair with a wig and had birthed five children in seven years, welcomed everyone, even Reform and Conservative rabbis, to their table. They didn't judge me for living a non-religious life that included premarital sex, cheeseburgers and Christian ex-boyfriends. Their unconditional acceptance convinced me that Orthodox Judaism could be a home for me.

Years later, that rabbi officiated at my wedding. By then, he and his family had moved away, and my community had drastically changed – malicious gossip that the previous rabbi had discouraged and an open disdain for Conservative and Reform Jews, whom most judged as not really Jewish and ignorant of the essence of Judaism. I proposed inviting "Orthodox feminists" to be guest scholars at the synagogue but, threatened by the word "feminist," the young women of the congregation shot me down.

It was during that time that I met my first husband. I was 28 and writing for magazines and newspapers; he was living in New York, wanting to be a musician. We went out on a blind date while he was in town for Thanksgiving. In a community where men wore white button-downs, black hats and black suits, he wore purple. He was religious, but seemed free-thinking and artistic like me, so I jumped into the relationship. We moved so fast that I ignored the warning signs: at 30, he'd never held a job for longer than nine months; it had taken him eight years to finish college; and it soon became clear that his untucked flannels over white T-shirts indicated not a rebellious grunge phase but a debilitating depression. I thought I could help him become his best self. Interestingly, I never considered looking for a relationship where we both lifted each other up. I just hoped one day we would find in each other the true love I so desperately wanted.

Once we were married, we invited couples to Friday dinners and Saturday lunches. Amid fluttering oak and maple trees, and in the harshest of winters, we walked more than a mile to sway in synagogue amid swelling voices and schmooze over cookies after services. My husband often led the congregation, his voice wrapping the prayers in lovely song, and those were the moments I admired him and found him

attractive. I befriended Adina, a rabbi's wife with a kosher candy business; Beth, a preschool teacher who became religious in her twenties alongside her husband, whom she'd met in college; Rivkie, an accountant, who wore sweats and shed her wig when no one was home; Khaya, who made a delicious lasagna and whose philosopher-husband gazed at her with an adoration that I envied.

But at home in the bungalow I'd bought when I was single, I watched *Friends*, while my husband hid in the basement, "working," (playing music). I went to bed alone. When we spent holidays with his family, I felt self-conscious that I didn't know the prayers well enough to sing along with my in-laws. Rather than stay up until 2 a.m. to finish the Passover seder, I left everyone at the table and crawled into bed with a book. My three babies, born within four years, distracted me from my doubts about my husband and the religious community I'd chosen. Often during that time, I found myself reflecting on a trip to Dublin I'd taken at 23 to visit my friend Catherine, long before I became religious in Judaism. I sat in her church on Good Friday, my frizzy hair and pale skin helping me pass as Irish, taking in the poetry and candlelight of a Taize service. The church reminded me of my Reform childhood synagogue in so many ways – soothing music, thoughtful poetry, people who wanted to be there, parishioners who were friendly and welcoming and accepting. I grew up in a Judaism that encouraged innovation – they were always adding programs or changing services to match the interests of the congregation. After all, Reform Judaism was founded on the idea that we can amend ancient traditions to meet modern times. I had more in common with Catherine's Irish Catholic community than the one I later married into.

All my life, I've searched for my people, yearning to enter a room and see faces alight with smiles and a shared knowing of *this is our place*. But in my marriage and in my community, I only fit if I wore the uniform and followed the rules. I wanted to find a place where it didn't matter what I wore, just that I was there. But in fact, four years in, when I permanently uncovered my hair, my two closest friends – Adina and preschool teacher Beth – stopped inviting me for Shabbat meals.

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At lunchtime in Bayla's 900-square-foot home, her family and 12 guests migrated to long, plastic-covered folding tables. Her husband, a tall rabbi with a gray beard, sang blessings over wine and bread. As we munched on challah rolls, women brought in plates of noodle kugel, bowls of thick, long-cooked *cholent* stew containing beef, potatoes and onions, and dishes of creamy coleslaw. After the meal, the men sang in Hebrew, slapping the table to keep rhythm.

I knew the words to the songs; the deep consonants of their voices shook the room. I had always loved Shabbat, sitting among a boisterous gathering of people who wanted nothing more from a Saturday than a warm lunch and hours of conversation. But in Bayla's house, my role as a religious woman was to keep silent. I missed singing with a swelling chorus of voices, like I had done at summer camp. Now, I only sang in the car when no one was listening.

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Before my wedding, my mother-in-law begged me to take my husband's surname. *Schreiber* was German for scribe, and since I was a writer, she insisted that meant her son and I were *bashert*, destined. Never mind that I was an author of books and articles bearing my maiden name, Cohn – which signified the biblical high priests. In the Orthodox world, a Cohn was more prestigious than a Schreiber. The *Cohanim* led the community, and I was the daughter of a *cohain*. By taking my husband's name, I let go of the clan I came from, the prestige I was born into.

I believed names can have power. They connect you to meaning, to history, to people. A recognizable name can pave your path, make it easy to enter parts of society previously closed off. For a time, because I had felt so at home in Catherine's community, I kept a list of Irish names I wanted for my future children. Before I met my husband, I fantasized about one day taking a man's name as a sign of the deep and abiding current that ran between us. A shared name would mean we were linked by more than a legal document - by a connection that strengthened us to face a harsh world. In that energy, I could be brazen and loud, speak my mind and be loved for it.

When I was growing up, most women took their husband's name – a tradition dating to the Middle Ages, when surnames became common in Europe as people began to travel and needed to distinguish themselves from one another. European last names either identified a person's father (Johnson means John's son); a land feature or location (Underhill or Atwood, for example); a nickname based on size or trait (Little, Short, Stern); or an occupation or status—Baker or Knight. Or Schreiber. Or Cohn.
I gave in to my mother-in-law, but ignored Bayla, keeping my English first name so I wouldn't disappear entirely. Of course, my English first name isn't mine, either, not exactly—parents decide what to call their children. While a surname unites a family, first names convey parents' hopes for the future and

connections to the past.

In my family, names, both English and Hebrew, mark the memories of those worth honoring. My parents gave me the English names Lynne Meredith Cohn and the Hebrew names Leah Masha. They chose Lynne, an "L" name, in memory of Grandpa Louie, the patriarch on my mother's side. Grandpa Louie was a butcher in Detroit's Eastern Market, a basketball player for B'nai Brith and so well-known that when he died, cars lined the streets around my grandparents' home for blocks. He wore the two-tone patent leather shoes and fedoras of the 1950s Rat Pack, and bought my mother her first car, long and wide with shiny hubcaps and tail wings.

When I was little, I slept at my grandparents' house some Friday nights. We ate Shabbat dinner in their kitchen – brisket in bubbling tomato sauce, crisp salad, soft bakery challah, Grandma's chicken soup flavored with fresh dill. Saturday morning, Grandpa took me to synagogue, where I'd wander into the middle of the row in the middle of the sanctuary where he sat wrapped in his *tallit*, his arm finding its way around my shoulders while he mumbled prayers.

On holidays, Grandpa poured sweet wine through a funnel into a sparkling crystal decanter. Grandma baked cherry squares and double chocolate brownies. As the sun set outside the window, the table held homemade gefilte fish, quivering hard-boiled eggs in crystal bowls, creamy chopped liver. I giggled with my cousins, in the embrace of a family following rituals handed down over generations. My names beckon these scenes, but there's a crick in my neck from always looking back. I needed a sense of who I could be in the present, or aim for something brighter, bigger and entirely my own.

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It's been so many years since I left the Orthodox world, that the people I meet now wonder how I could have been that person. "You?" they ask. "You're so strong and independent. I can't see you in that quiet little role."

They can't see me with covered hair and long skirts, as the *balabusta* cooking past midnight on a Thursday to get everything ready for the Sabbath. They can't see me sitting behind the *mechitzah,* the lattice wood divider on the women's side of the synagogue, peering through to only kind of make out the action in the men's section, their swaying to and fro in prayer, their singing and back-slapping and

gossiping as the rabbi called out the page number.

When I was religious, I did a photo shoot for a forthcoming book. I wore a big-brimmed black velvet hat, all of my hair tucked up inside it. The angle of the camera shows me looking down, half of my face obscured in what I thought at the time was a poetic gaze. Now, I look at that image and see a woman hiding in a role that doesn't suit her.

I don't know how I was that person, either.

When Bayla told me to drop my English name, she was telling me to reject myself. She was saying that to fit in to her world, I'd have to become a different person. I didn't realize that my invitation to her home was conditional – the opposite of why I'd joined her community in the first place. It took seven years to realize how invisible I was. To her. To my chosen community. Even to my husband.

True love doesn't require a new wardrobe, a different name or an unnatural code of conduct. Of course I didn't fit into the Orthodox world! I was hiding and silencing everything that made me Lynne. If I didn't like the person I was trying to be – why would anyone else? I see now that agonizing over my name replaced a more uncomfortable line of questioning: Who did I want to be? And could I accept who I was?

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Eight years after becoming Lynne Schreiber, I ended my marriage and left Orthodoxy. I gave away boxes of hats, setting my hair free in the wind. I donated long skirts and long sleeves to charity and pulled on jeans and tank tops. I spent holidays hiking forested trails with my children. On Yom Kippur, we threw chunks of bread into the rapid current of a nearby river, watching our sins drift away.

About six months before I filed for divorce, I told my mother that I was contemplating ending my marriage. "Don't do it because you think you'll find another, better love," she said. "Do it because you'd rather be alone than remain with him."

For the first time in my life, I was happy being alone. In fact, it felt calming. For so many years, I'd yearned for love, and the absence of a partner felt like a commentary on my desirability. I no longer believed that lack of a partner meant I was unlovable. And now I knew that if I remained alone for the rest of my life, I

lack of a partner meant I was unlovable. And now I knew that if I remained alone for the rest of my life, I would be OK.

A year and a half later, I met Dan, who would become my second husband. He comes from Irish and English ancestors on one side and Jewish stock from the Black Sea on the other, and his names reveal the mix of identities he was born into. He didn't care if I took his surname, but it felt odd to keep my first husband's name, even though it linked me to my children.

I considered reclaiming Cohn, but that felt like sliding backward. I imagined dropping surnames altogether and calling myself Lynne Meredith. Or choosing something totally new, pulling from that list of Irish names I'd collected years earlier. But any change would require rigorous form-filing and office-calling and for what?

As we packed up the house I'd shared with my first husband to move to a new home for our blended family, I ran my fingers over my books. My first poetry collection, *Driving Off the Horizon* by Lynne Meredith Cohn; my nonfiction tome about Jewish hair-covering, *Hide and Seek,* and my second poetry collection, *Living Inside,* by Lynne Meredith Schreiber. My next book, *The Flavors of Faith: Holy Breads,* would bear the name Lynne Golodner (there wasn't room on the cover for Meredith).

In my new life, bolstered by self-love as well as the unconditional love of my children and new husband, I stopped caring about my name. Today, I answer to whatever, even when my kids' friends mistakenly call me Mrs. Schreiber. I took Dan's surname because it felt easiest. Anti-climactic, I know. But we always go to bed together, and when we align on parenting decisions or say the same words at the same time, I smile at the synergy. Dan chants, "Team Golodner!" and I pump my fist. He loves me for my strong personality, my independent streak and my no-nonsense tendencies to call-it-like-it-is. He loves my passion, too. And finally, I love all these things about myself.

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